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DE RUEHNT #0601/01 1190440
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 290452Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0821
INFO CIS COLLECTIVE
NATO EU COLLECTIVE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHMFIUU/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON DC
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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0248
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0241
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 TASHKENT 000601

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SNAR](#) [KCRM](#) [PHUM](#) [KCOR](#) [ASEC](#) [TI](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: NARCOTICS SEIZURES NOW REGULARLY HIGHLIGHTED IN
STATE-CONTROLLED MEDIA

REF: 08 TASHKENT 1163

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: This is the first of planned regular updates about narcotics seizures publicized in the Uzbek state-controlled mass media. Emboffs have noted a substantial increase recently in the number of articles and television news reports highlighting narcotics-related arrests and seizures. While the National Center for Drug Control has always provided the Embassy with its official statistics for inclusion in the annual International Narcotics Control and Strategy Report (INCSR) Volume 1, the reports in the media provide some interesting context about individual narcotics seizures. A recurrent theme in the reports is to reinforce the Government of Uzbekistan's complaints that Afghan drugs enter the country via Tajikistan, and there are liberal references to "Tajik accomplices" who tempt Uzbeks into perpetrating drug crimes. Another common denominator is the reference to arrests involving Surkhandarya residents, the strategic southernmost province that shares a rugged border with Tajikistan, a well-defended river border with Afghanistan, and a desert border with Turkmenistan. While Uzbekistan seems genuinely alarmed by the flow of Afghan-origin narcotics, it has been reluctant to accept an Embassy proposal to establish a Counternarcotics Section under the direction of accredited DEA Agents. End summary.

Drug Seizures Now Common in the Press

¶2. (U) The Embassy counted more than 50 narcotics-related articles in the press clips during the first quarter of 2009, which includes some BBC Monitoring-produced reports or summaries of national television broadcasts. Not long ago Uzbekistan refused to acknowledge that narcotics use or trafficking was a serious problem but, consistent with frank conversations with high-level visitors over the past year about the surge in narcotics emanating north from Afghanistan, public reports about arrests now appear several times per week. This report summarizes publicly reported information from January - March, 2009, and we will continue to track and regularly report narcotic seizures.

Reports Focus on Trafficking Via the Tajik Border

13. (U) On January 17, Uzbek Television First Channel aired a 26-minute segment on drug trafficking, noting "of late, Uzbek law enforcement agencies have been uncovering frequent attempts to smuggle drugs from Tajikistan to Uzbekistan." It went on to describe a bust at the Tashkent Airport by the National Security Service (NSS) in conjunction with Customs officers of a criminal group from the Uzbek border town of Bekobod which shuttled drugs to Moscow. Women were typically used as mules, it reported, because they are not searched as thoroughly. A Tajik national was reportedly behind the scheme and recruited Uzbeks looking for easy money in tough financial times. "It is known that Tajik drug dealers are attempting to set up a permanent drug transit route via our country and regularly use it," the anchor lamented, adding that "the worst thing is that they still keep involving our fellow countrymen living in border areas in this job and pursuing their goals using their services."

14. (U) Press reported on January 17 that two brothers were

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convicted of selling 16.7 grams of heroin in the Denov District of Surkhandarya Province.

15. (U) Uzbek Television First Channel aired a story on January 20 about a 22-kilo heroin seizure in southeastern Uzbekistan (probably Surkhandarya). It noted the drugs "belonged to a Tajik national" but were seized from two Surkhandarya residents and that the narcotics "were smuggled through the back roads from neighboring Tajikistan."

16. (U) The newspaper Tashkent Mahalla reported on January 21 that a "dangerous organized criminal group" of 18 people (including 11 women) in Khorezm Province was convicted of drug crimes. It reportedly had operated since 2002 and sold heroin around Uzbekistan as well as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Five ringleaders - all relatives - were sentenced to prison terms of 13-18 years.

17. (U) The Ministry of Internal Affairs newspaper Na Postu reported on January 24 that 500 grams of narcotics was discovered in a baby's diaper during a search on a bus from Tashkent to Nukus. The offenders were from Urgut in Samarkand Province.

18. (U) On February 3 the Uzbek Television First Channel broadcast that another resident of Urgut was arrested in Bukhara at one of many routine traffic checkpoints after three packages of heroin were found in the car's heating system totaling over 1.5 kilograms. The suspect admitted he "received the drugs from a Tajik citizen" and was instructed to deliver the drugs to a contact in the Urgench bazaar. Another Nexia automobile was stopped in Navoiy, where sniffer dogs uncovered 2.5 kg of opium on the driver and another 2 kilos in luggage. This driver also confessed that "Tajik citizens handed it over to him."

19. (U) On February 7 the same channel aired another narcotics

seizure report, this time involving an Afghan citizen who was arrested with 10 kilograms of opium on the southern border. The Balkh resident apparently tried to smuggle the drugs across the river, which has been heavily guarded since Soviet times. The NSS, Border Guards, and Customs conducted the operation on January 29 at 11PM.

¶10. (U) On February 8 the Uzbek Television First Channel reported that a Nexia sedan was stopped at the Chandir checkpoint in the Romitan District of Bukhara Province by NSS and MVD officers. A search revealed that 9.5 kilograms of heroin was stashed in bags on the underside of the car, along with 200 grams of opium. A Tashkent Province man was driving, and reported "the drugs were hidden by a Tajik accomplice." This shipment was also apparently bound for Urgench in the country's northwest.

¶11. (U) Surkhandarya TV reported on February 13 that an Afghan national crossed the river border near Termez in a boat on the night of January 29 in possession of 19 kilos of opium.

¶12. (U) On February 15 the Uzbek Television First Channel reported a 23-kg seizure on February 9 in the town of Denov, Surkhandarya Province. First officers arrested three locals attempting to sell 350 grams of heroin, which in turn led them to another man and a bigger seizure. Again, officials "established that the drugs had

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been smuggled from Tajikistan into our country." Authorities also confiscated 2 kilos of hashish and plastic capsules designed for ingesting drugs in the stomach. (Note: This also highlights that Uzbek investigators are trying to build on small finds and go after the supplier. End note.)

¶13. (U) On February 18 the Uzbek Television First Channel again aired a drug trafficking story with a heavy anti-Tajik message, with the commentator stating "our country is fighting to terminate drug trafficking, especially transit routes for Tajik heroin. Unfortunately, there are still cases where fellow compatriots become involved in drug trafficking by dancing to the Tajik drug dealers' tune, motivated by greed." It went on to describe that on February 10, a Bekobod resident was arrested with 1 kilo of heroin and had been working with a Tajik accomplice. It again mentioned "increasingly intensive activities of criminal groups in neighboring Tajikistan." Another example was given of a Tajik national who was caught with nearly a kilogram of heroin in a cellophane bag. The story proceeded to shame a teacher in Sariosiyo District of Surhandarya who was also found with a kilo of heroin of Tajik origin. Finally, the report mentioned a third-time offending female was caught trying to sell 3.5 kilos of heroin in Denov after smuggling it from Tajikistan.

¶14. (U) The regional paper "Namangan Diyonat" reported on February 19 that police had uncovered 15 cases of drug trafficking in January alone in Namangan, including 1.5 kilos of marijuana.

¶15. (U) The Russian Internet news agency Regnum reported on February 24 that a retired colonel from the Kyrgyz security services was arrested for smuggling and selling large quantities of drugs in Namangan Province, Uzbekistan. The NSS linked him after initially arresting a local man with 225 grams of hashish, who identified the former officer as a supplier. He was subsequently arrested on his next visit to the country.

¶16. (U) On February 25 another instance was reported of an Afghan trying to illegally cross into Uzbekistan with 25 kilos of opium in a sack near the Amu Darya River. The man confessed that financial difficulties compelled him to get involved in drug trafficking.

¶17. (U) The Uzbek television show "Axborot" News reported on February 26 about 14 arrests in a raid in the Yangiyol District of Tashkent Province on February 1

¶18. (U) The small regional paper "Termez Oqshomi" reported on February 16 that an Afghan national was sentenced to 19 years in prison for smuggling 27 kilos of opium into Uzbekistan in two sacks while in possession of an AK-47 assault rifle.

¶19. (U) On March 3 a large 107-kilo heroin seizure was made in Russia that had been transported on a train originating in Kokand, Uzbekistan, according to Interfax.

¶20. (U) The newspaper "Tashkent Huquq" on March 5 reported that a 27-year old Uzbek Customs officer from Surkhandarya Province was sentenced to 20 years in prison for drug trafficking. He was arrested by the NSS with 715 grams of heroin; subsequent checks of his home revealed four white plastic sacks buried in the yard containing 139 kilos of opium. He was formerly an inspector at the

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Galaba Customs checkpoint, which is a strategic railhead in the country's far south where train tracks from Afghanistan and Tajikistan converge. It is an encouraging sign that the Uzbek Government is willing to prosecute corrupt officials after its 2008 adoption of the UN Convention Against Corruption. (Note: The arrest and seizure date were not specified, but were probably in the fall of 2008).

¶21. (U) On March 11 there was yet another report that in Denau in Surkhandarya, 27 bags containing 25 kilos of drugs were found in a basement. Again, it mentions that "a Tajik resident" delivered the shipment.

¶22. (U) "Tashkent Hayot" reported on March 13 that a Tashkent mother of five was sentenced to 13 years in prison for smuggling heroin from Tajikistan and attempting to sell 840 grams in the Uzbek capital.

¶23. (U) The Uzbek Television First Channel reported on March 16 that a Kazakhstan-bound vehicle was stopped in Tashkent Province after attempting to bypass a checkpoint. The vehicle was filled with fresh herbs as a diversion, but the boxes also contained 140 kilograms of heroin. A group of Tajik criminals was blamed for the attempt to ship drugs to Russia, and it again shamed Uzbeks "who want to make easy money" and "lured by drug trafficking groups from Tajikistan." Significantly, reports mentioned that the catch was partly in response to information received about the attempt, an indication that the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Center (CARICC) is paying dividends.

¶24. (U) On March 17, Interfax reported that the Uzbek Ministry of Internal Affairs arrested a Surkhandarya man and woman in a Nexia sedan in the northwest of Uzbekistan with nine kilos of drugs

"presumably trafficked from Tajikistan" and bound for Russia.
(Note: A trafficker going by road across Uzbekistan to the northwest has to run a gauntlet of Uzbek traffic checkpoints at almost every township and provincial border. End note.)

¶25. (U) On March 21, Regnum News Agency of Russia reported that Uzbek Customs officers in Surkhandarya Province arrested a local resident with 12.5 kilos of heroin. The report added that already since the start of 2009, the Uzbek State Customs Committee had made 30 drug trafficking busts and seized 87 kilos of hard drugs. This is in addition to seizures made by the Interior Ministry, Border Guards, and National Security Service.

Drug Charges Can Also be Politically Motivated

¶26. (SBU) While the vast majority of press clips are probably genuine stories of drug trafficking, there were also reports about prominent journalist Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison in remote northwestern Karakalpakstan Province on what we believe to be politically motivated drug charges (reftel). Authorities initially charged him with possession of drugs and then altered the investigation to charge him with intent to sell. Thus, while we welcome Uzbekistan's efforts to address a drug problem that we concur is getting more serious as a result of increased narcotics production in Afghanistan, we remain concerned that Uzbek authorities are willing to use narcotics charges as a pretense for imprisoning journalists or activists. Activists have

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reported that this case is not the first such instance, as authorities have allegedly planted narcotics on activists and journalists as a means of discrediting them and handing down lengthy prison terms.

Comment:

¶27. (SBU) The press reports illustrate some encouraging trends in counternarcotics activities, although we are still at a loss to explain why Uzbekistan has not accepted - or even responded to - our proposal to establish a Counternarcotics Section which would be administered by two openly accredited DEA Agents. Uzbekistan would appear to have everything to gain and nothing to lose in cooperating more closely with the U.S. Government through DEA, but there may be powerful factions within the Uzbek Government with entrenched interests in keeping the U.S. and DEA Agents at bay. It is also noteworthy that relations with Tajikistan have actually thawed recently, with progress on border demarcation and even talk of resuming air links between the capitals, yet Tajikistan is still blamed much more than Afghanistan for the mostly Afghan-origin narcotics that penetrate Uzbek territory. Due to the heavy controls on the direct border with Afghanistan, international observers including at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime agree that a majority of narcotics enter Uzbekistan from the long, rugged, and often porous border with Tajikistan to the east.

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